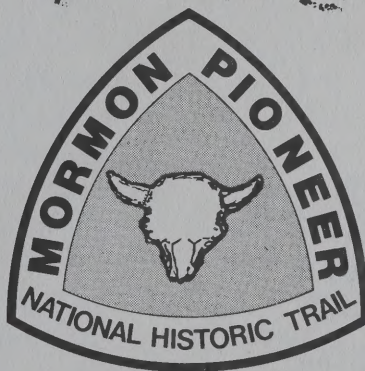


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The 1856 Handcart Disaster

~Adventures in the Past~



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THE 1856 HANDCART
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Cholera, childbirth, Indian attack, drowning at river crossings, accidents, even

cannibalism. There were lots of ways for emigrants to die on western trails in the 1800's. However, mother nature was perhaps the most efficient killer of all. The largest, single disaster ever recorded on the Mormon



Pioneer Trail, befell two parties of Mormon converts who were pulling handcarts in the late fall of 1856, and this time, it was weather that was the grim reaper.

The Mormon Exodus of 1846-47 to Utah Territory was only the beginning of emigrant travel on the overland route or the Mormon Trail to Utah. Thousands of converts followed in succeeding years. Besides religious freedom, moving to Zion offered the hope and opportunity of economic freedom, especially for displaced and poverty-stricken victims of Europe's industrial revolution.

Moving from Europe to Utah was expensive and not all converts had the money so the Latter Day Saints Church's Perpetual Emigration Fund financed expenses for tens of thousands of eager overseas emigrants.

A grasshopper plague descended on Utah in 1855 and funds were short. So, an earlier plan, which cut expenses for emigrants was given the go-ahead and the great handcart treks of 1856-1860 were underway. Instead of large wagons, handcarts held lighter loads and were pulled by humans, thus replacing expensive wagons and draft animals.

Almost 4,400 converts arrived in the United States during the winter 1855-56. They landed at New York and went by train to Iowa City, Iowa - the outfitting and jumping off point. The first three handcart "companies" of 1856 made it to Salt Lake without major incident. They paralleled the

Missouri River from Iowa City to Florence, Nebraska; from there they followed the Platte and North Platte Rivers into Wyoming Territory to Fort Laramie. They continued on the "river road" following the Sweetwater to South Pass. From here, they went to Fort Bridger and on to Salt Lake, traveling part of the Hastings' Cutoff which the ill-fated Donner Party took in 1846.

The Willie Company (fourth) and the Martin Company (fifth) groups of handcart pullers ran into the same problem the Donners did - snow. The 500 people making up the Willie Company left Florence, Nebraska on August 18th, 1856 followed by 576 people in the Martin Company on August 25th, who were in turn followed by 385 people in the Hodgett Wagon Train.

The last half of August is much too late to travel hundreds of miles overland by wagon or by foot through Wyoming's high plains and expect to reach Salt Lake before the snow flies. Winter comes early and fast in the mountains and higher elevations around South Pass.

In fact, the Willie Company had a general vote at Florence and with the exception of one clearthinking man named Levi Savage, voted to continue on to Zion. For a lot of bad reasons, which were hotly debated later, over 1,000 emigrants continued their journey flying in the face of common sense and impending winter.

A fast-traveling group of Mormon missionary organizers who were headed west to Salt Lake overtook the Willie and Martin Companies. Although the missionaries had traveled the Trail themselves at least once east to west and back again, they encouraged the emigrants to press on, knowing what hardships could be in store for them. The missionary leader, Franklin D. Richards, purchased 100 buffalo robes at Fort Laramie and left instructions for them to be distributed to the emigrants upon their arrival. The missionaries continued to Salt Lake at good speed and arrived on October 1st. Richards immediately met with Mormon leader Brigham Young to apprise him of the situation.

In the meantime, early winter storms

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blasted eastern Wyoming and the cold, exposure, overwork, short rations, and bad decisions began to take their toll.

One man in the Willie Company, John Chislett, recorded ...*Cold weather, scarcity of food, lassitude and fatigue from over-exertion, soon produced their effects. Our old and infirm people began to droop, and they no sooner lost spirit and courage than death's stamp could be traced upon their features. Life went out as smoothly as a lamp ceases to burn when the oil is gone. At first the deaths occurred slowly and irregularly, but in a few days at more frequent intervals, until we soon thought it unusual to leave a campground without burying one or more persons.*

The Martin Company was several days and miles **east** of the Willie Company, and were in an even worse predicament than the others when the bad weather hit. Members of the Martin Company had made several serious errors in judgement, such as crossing a freezing river on foot rather than pay the toll even though they had the money, and by throwing away the buffalo robes purchased for them at Fort Laramie because they were too heavy to pull in the handcarts.

Once the emigrants realized their mistakes, it was too late to do anything about them. They hoped that help was on the way from Salt Lake, several hundred miles away. However, courage, stout hearts and their faith in God, didn't stop winter's relentless grip or the grim reaper's visits to their camps. Their journey to Zion had turned into a death march. For a lot of reasons - some good, some bad - and a bit of plain old bad luck, about 1,000 people were trapped on the high plains of Wyoming in danger of dying to the last man, woman and child.

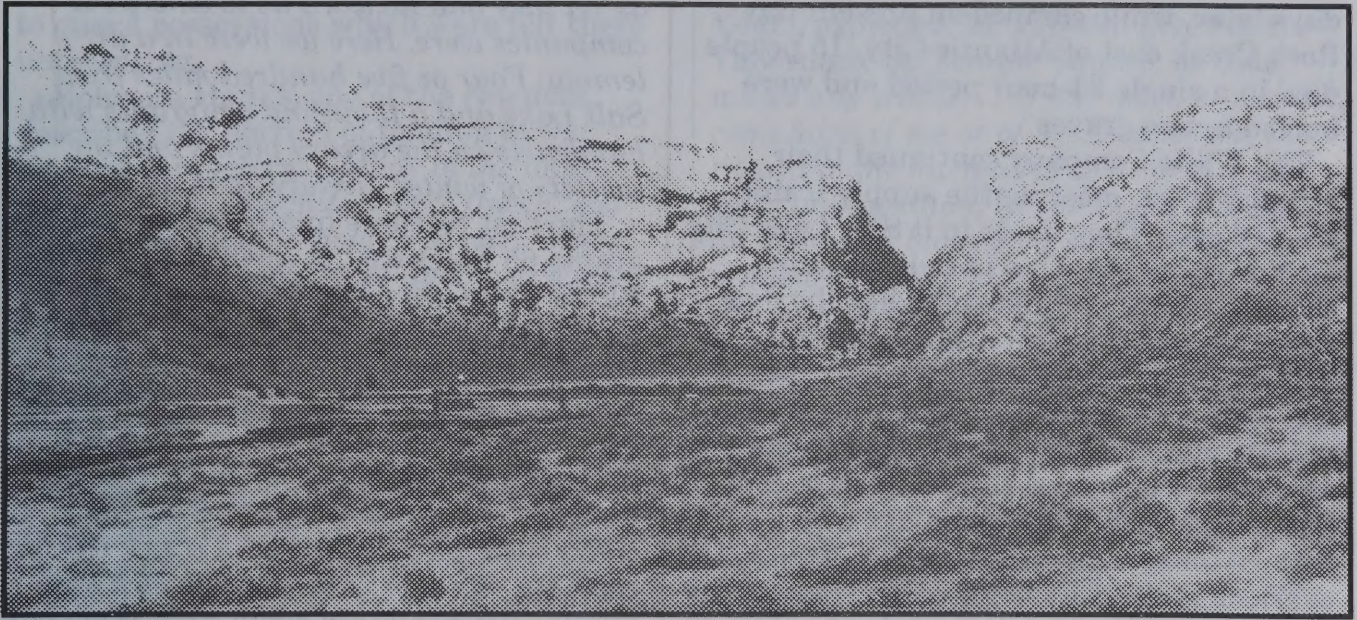
By early October, the story of the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies had become three separate stories - the plight of the Willie Company east of South Pass; the Martin Company, who were even further east between Fort Laramie and Devil's Gate; and, the rescue efforts originating out of Salt Lake City.

When Brigham Young got word of the state of the handcart pilgrims on the eve of the Mormon Church's semi-annual conference, he wasted no time making a decision. Addressing members of the church, Young called for immediate action in no uncertain terms, ...*It is to save the people. This is the*

salvation I am now seeking for. To save our brethren that would be apt to perish, or suffer extremely, if we do not send them assistance. I shall call upon the Bishops this day. I shall not wait until tomorrow, nor until the next day, for 60 good mule teams and 12 or 15 wagons. I do not want to send oxen. I want good horses and mules...

In addition to teams, supplies, and food, Brigham called for 40 good young





Devil's Gate on the Sweetwater River was one of the major landmarks on the Oregon Trail. Martin's Cove, where members of the Martin Handcart Company and their rescuers "holed up," is about two miles west of the cleft in the rock. It is located on private land and permission is required to visit the site. In 1976, BLM built an interpretive site just off Highway 220, north of Muddy Gap. This picture was taken while the site was under construction.

men who know how to drive teams, to take charge of the teams that are now managed by men, women, and children who know nothing about them...

By October 7th, the first rescue group left Salt Lake consisting of "16 good four-mule teams and 27 hardy young men headed eastward with the first installment of provisions." The people in Salt Lake realized the magnitude of the situation and kept a steady stream of wagons, supplies, and help headed east. By the end of October some 250 teams were on the road.

One member of the first rescue group, Harvey Cluff, recorded later, ... *Nine miles brought us down to the Sweetwater River where we camped for the night. On arising in the following morning snow was several inches deep. During the two following days, the storm raged with increasing fury until it attained the capacity of a northern blizzard. For protection of ourselves and animals, the company moved down the river to where the willows were dense enough to make a good protection against the raging storm from the north. The express team ... had been dispatched ahead as rapidly as possible to reach and give encouragement to the faltering emigrants, by letting them know that*

help was near at hand.

The original 500 people making up the Willie Company were no longer 500. As they struggled westward on the Trail, each morning there were fresh corpses to bury. Captain Willie had left his charges and pressed on ahead to find the help he knew was on the way. Back at camp, John Chislett described the situation, ... *The weather grew colder every day, and many got their feet so badly frozen that they could not walk, and had to be lifted from place to place. Some got their fingers frozen; others their ears; and one woman lost her sight by the frost. These severities of the weather also increased our number of deaths, so that we buried several each day.*

On October 21, the first rescuers arrived and in Chislett's words *Shouts of joy rent the air; strong men wept till tears ran freely down their furrowed and sun-burnt cheeks ... Restraint was set aside in the general rejoicing, and as the brethren entered our camp the sisters fell upon them and deluged them with kisses.*

Half of the rescuers pressed on ahead to find the Martin Company while the remaining half reinforced the Willie Company people and got them on their way. By no

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means was their ordeal over. In fact, a few days later, while camped on present-day Rock Creek east of Atlantic City, 15 people died in a single 24-hour period and were buried in two graves.

The Willie Company continued their struggle west, meeting the supply trains headed east. They made to it Salt Lake City on November 9th. One individual story, though, stands out and embodies the determination and true grit of the emigrants.

One young Scotch woman - Margret Dalglish - continued to pull her handcart despite offers to load her meager possessions in a wagon and ride in relative comfort to Salt Lake. She toiled her way through snow and cold until she came to the overlook of the Salt Lake Valley. Seeing the end of her journey of thousands of miles from Scotland, she took her handcart loaded with all her earthly goods, pushed it over a cliff, and proudly walked into the valley owning only the clothes on her back.

expressmen awating (sic) our coming up, for as yet they had no word as to where the companies were. Here we were in a dilemma. Four or five hundred miles from Salt Lake and a thousand emigrants with handcarts on the dreary plains and the severity of winter already upon us ...

The first rescuers finally found the emigrants 65 miles east of Devil's Gate at Red Bluffs where they had been trapped by a blizzard. And they were in pitiful shape. Dan Jones recorded what he saw, ... *A condition of distress here met my eyes that I never saw before or since. The train was strung out for three or four miles. There were old men pulling and tugging their carts, sometimes loaded with a sick wife or children - women pulling along sick husbands - little children six to eight years old struggling through the mud and snow. As night came on the mud would freeze on their clothes and feet. There were two of us and hundreds needing help. What could we do?*

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Dan Jones, 1856

The Willie Company's arrival in Salt Lake was cause for a huge celebration before harsh reality set in. Of the original 500 who had set out for Salt Lake, 67 were dead, and many others had lost fingers or entire limbs to frostbite. And worse yet, over half the emigrants were still somewhere out on the plains in serious trouble.

The last of the handcart emigrants of 1856, the Martin Company and the Hodgett Wagon Train, were in dire straits by October. Winter had struck with a vengeance. Clothing was short, rations were shorter, people were dying of exposure, and hundreds of miles still loomed between them and safety. It was fast becoming a matter of logistics - getting enough provisions to hundreds of people facing extinction.

One of the rescuers, Harvey Cluff wrote, ... *On arriving at Devils Gate we found the*

The rescuers bolstered spirits and encouraged the people along the Trail. Their immediate goal was to reach Devil's Gate where the decision would be made on whether to continue or to attempt to hole up for the winter.

Between the crossings of the North Platte and the first crossing of the Sweetwater, 65 people died. Once they arrived at Devil's Gate, they camped in a sheltered cove two miles west of that famous landmark. The spot is still known today as Martin's Cove.

More people died at the Cove and many others were near death. Because of the logistical problems involved in supplying what amounted to a small city throughout a long winter, the decision was made to press on. A small group of men were chosen to stay behind at the stockade at Devil's Gate

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to guard possessions which were left there until spring.

Ephraim Hanks, one of the rescuers, described the horrors of tending to the wretched travelers, *...Many of the immigrants whose extremities were frozen, lost their limbs, either whole or in part. Many such I washed with water and castile soap, until the frozen parts would fall off, after which I would sever the limbs with my scissors. Some of the emigrants lost toes, others fingers, and again others whole hands and feet ...*

One young girl went to bed with her family, only to awaken screaming in pain in the night. A man was eating her fingers while she slept. He was dragged off into the snow, began eating his own fingers, and was found dead the next morning.

That one incident, which occurred at Willow Springs, is the only documented instance which even approached the unthinkable actions of the Donner Party - cannibalism.

Even with the aid of food and supplies, the deaths continued on the final leg, so many in fact that there is not an accurate count to this day. The figures range from 135 to 150 fatalities in the Martin Company alone. Add to that number the 67 deaths recorded in the Willie Company and uncounted deaths of the Hodgett Wagon Train, over 200 people or about one out of six perished. It was the greatest single tragedy in the entire history of the western migration.

Through sheer perseverance and unwavering support from Salt Lake, the emigrants finally made it to the Valley. On November 30, 1856, they arrived in Salt Lake.

Like so many other human disasters, even before all the emigrants were safely housed in Salt Lake, people started looking for someone to blame.

Somebody definitely had to be at fault, but who exactly? A few whisperings of criticism reached the ears of Brigham Young saying that the leadership of the Mormon Church was to blame. A dynamic leader and not given to taking criticism,

Young exploded. In a speech given at the Tabernacle on Temple Square, he didn't mince any words, *... If any man, or woman, complains of me or of my Counselors, in regard to the lateness of some of this season's immigration, let the Curse of God be on them and blast their substance with mildew and destruction, until their names are forgotten from the earth...*

That same year, 1856, was the eve of yet another fight for Mormon survival - the Utah War of 1857, when the Territory was "invaded" by soldiers of the United States. In many ways, Young was the leader of a sovereign nation, struggling to hold his people and his country together. He could not afford dissention in the ranks.

The best summary of the entire 1856 handcart disaster was written by Wallace Stegner in Collier's magazine, July 6, 1956, "Perhaps their suffering seems less dramatic because they bore it meekly, praising God, instead of fighting for life with the ferocity of animals and eating their dead to keep their own life beating, as both the Fremont and Donner parties did. And assuredly, the handcart pilgrims were less hardy, less skilled, and less well equipped to be pioneers. But, if courage and endurance make a story, if human kindness and helpfulness and brotherly love in the midst of raw horror are worth recording, this half-forgotten episode of the Mormon migration is one of the great tales of the West and of America."



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